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SUBJECT: KEY OPPOSITION MEMBER'S POLITICAL INSIGHTS

REF: A. BANJUL 65
 1B. BANJUL 70

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Classified By: Poloff Menaka M. Nayyar, Reason 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Omar Jallow, commonly known as "O.J.," a prominent figure in the opposition National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD) coalition, met with Ambassador and Poloff to discuss his view of the Gambian political scene. He blamed the divided opposition for their poor showing in both the September 2006 presidential election and the January 25 National Assembly elections, while judging those results -- i.e. President Jammeh's and his APRC party's landslide victories -- to be credible. He characterized the electorate as disillusioned with the fractured opposition parties, and cited the need for a strategic partnership between his NADD coalition and the leading opposition alliance led by the United Democratic Party (UDP). Jallow also indicated that civil disorder could not be ruled out should the restrictive political environment and lack of economic opportunity for youths in The Gambia continue unabated. END SUMMARY

POINTING THE FINGER -- AT THE OPPOSITION

12. (C) On February 21, Ambassador and Poloff met with Omar Jallow, a.k.a. O.J., a veteran politician, senior NADD official and former GOTG cabinet member prior to the 1994 coup. He recently returned to The Gambia from a lengthy convalescence in the U.K. which kept him out of the country during the September 22, 2006 presidential contest and much of the run-up to the January 25 National Assembly elections, for which he was present. O.J. said that he accepted the results of the elections -- both President Jammeh's September victory and his ruling party Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC)'s dominance in the National Assembly contest -- as credible. He went beyond targeting the APRC's wrongdoings in the elections by faulting the opposition parties for their own defeats after the umbrella NADD coalition splintered into separate NADD and UDP alliances in early 2006. Jallow noted that in The Gambia's nationwide elections prior to this latest National Assembly contest, voter turnout in the country had never been below 65 percent, and he interpreted the turnout rate for the January elections (42 percent) as, in large part, a protest by the electorate against the opposition parties for their inability to move past divisions among themselves to maintain a united front against the APRC. O.J. estimated that a united opposition could have garnered over 20 seats (out of a total of 48 elected seats) in the recent National Assembly election.

FORGING AHEAD IN HARMONY, IF NOT UNITY

¶3. (SBU) In his discussion of the way forward for both NADD and the opposition as a whole, O.J. lamented what he saw as a reversion of the democratic process, with power increasingly centralized in the executive. He cited the need for the UDP and NADD to consolidate their gains in the National Assembly elections -- the two parties carried 5 seats between them, with a sixth going to an independent candidate (ref A). He stated that NADD is soon to issue a press release to invite discussion amongst the opposition parties with the aspiration to form an understanding to work together. At the same time, O.J. stressed that NADD is not yet looking to restore its alliance with the UDP coalition, but for now would like a small committee from both alliances to negotiate a common strategy for the next five years with an eye to the 2011 presidential election.

MOU STILL VALID

¶4. (SBU) O.J. said he felt that the Commonwealth-brokered Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) establishing a "code of conduct" among the three contesting parties -- the UDP alliance, NADD coalition, and ruling APRC -- signed in February 2006 had not had an adequate opportunity to be effective, with the opposition divided. During the elections, he claimed, there was no respect of the MOU, but again, he placed the blame mostly on what he called the opposition's "irresponsible behavior," explaining that their disunity meant that the parties were not as respected or as credible nationally or internationally, and that they had lost popular support accordingly. Jallow emphasized that the

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MOU remained an important document, and noted that he had spoken with the Commonwealth Secretariat in London about working further to facilitate interparty dialog and, for example, get the parties to send unified requests to NGOs for training for all parties, including the APRC. He also cited the National Council for Civil Education (NCCE) as a target for improvement, highlighting the need for it to be an independent body to foster a culture of democracy and reinforce the necessary structures to uphold "the pillars of democracy."

APRC HEAVYWEIGHTS AFRAID

¶5. (C) An old hand in Gambian politics, O.J. noted that he has maintained strong contacts with individuals in the senior ranks of the APRC, including Vice-President, Isatou Njie-Saidy, senior APRC official and Secretary of State for Fisheries and Natural Resources, Yankuba Touray, and Secretary of State for Forestry and the Environment, Edward

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Singhatey, as well as the new head of the National Intelligence Agency, Pa Jallow. He said that while these officials were favorably inclined toward the idea of discussions with NADD, they feared the authoritarian instincts of President Jammeh and his expected opposition to such discussions made them unlikely. O.J. went on to assert that as Jammeh's power has increased, these key figures have downplayed their relationship with Jallow. O.J. did not dismiss the possibility of another coup attempt, though he said he would never condone it. He also categorized Jammeh's latest role as a healer (ref B) as a diversion to mask the growing economic hardships and reduced political space facing Gambians, and worried that they could be potentially dangerous for the country as well as catastrophic for

tourism, a key industry in The Gambia.

BOILING POINT?

¶6. (C) Elaborating, Jallow did not rule out prospects for turmoil in the country, characterizing the Gambian public, and youths in particular, as increasingly disenchanted. He did not rule out the possibility of negative public sentiments boiling over and degenerating into civil disorder, citing the bloody uprising surrounding the 1981 failed coup attempt, which, he recalled, resulted in some 250 deaths.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) It is noteworthy that O.J., as a seasoned political veteran formerly opposed to the government, accepts as credible the election results from both the September 2006 presidential race and the January National Assembly elections. Also noteworthy is his placement of the blame on the opposition more than the APRC's and GOTG's irregularities during the elections as reasons for the APRC's dominance. His warning about the prospects of disorder cannot be dismissed, though there are no visible signs at present that it is on the horizon. His mention of the 1981 violence among the peace-loving Gambians is a reminder that the country has not been immune from unrest. END COMMENT

STAFFORD